

Born to Win

Making Life Work #2

by Ronald L. Dart

Once upon a time, there was a man who was lost in the desert. He had been out there about three days. He'd gone up one sand dune and down the other, and there was no relief in sight. And finally, parched with thirst, he collapses down the side of one sand dune; and he sees buried in the sand ahead of him—half-buried—a bottle with a cork in it. He can't believe that there is water or something to drink out here in the desert, but he crawls over to the bottle, pulls it out of the sand, and pulls the cork out of the bottle. Ah, but there's no water that comes out, just smoke.

But slowly, the smoke begins to form itself into a shape; and what should he see but, behold, a genie. And the genie says, "Oh, thank you, Master. I have been in that bottle for hundreds of years, and you have released me. As a reward, I want to give you three wishes—whatever your heart's desire, whatever you want, it is yours. Just say the word." And he thought for a moment; and he considered the *terrible, aching, parched* thirst; and he said, "I want one *cold* beer."

Now, there was no explosion, no *poof*, no noise like you would normally think of in all the stories about genies. But suddenly, where there had been nothing, now there was a mahogany bar, a brass rail, the genie standing behind it dressed as a bar tender; and on top of the bar, a tall, frosty glass of beer. So he steps up to the bar, takes the glass in his hand, drinks it down in one long draft, and then with a sigh coming up from the bottom of his feet says, "*Oh*, that was *good*!" And as he stood there the genie says, "Master, um...you have two more wishes, and I don't have very much time. Please tell me what else you want." And he said, "Well, I'll tell you. I'll have two more just like that one."

Now, this is just a joke. It's a joke about the folly that leads a man with three wishes to ask for three beers. Why didn't he ask to be taken out of the desert? Why not a seaside resort, with plenty of money to buy his own hotel at the seaside resort, and maybe a wish left over at the end of it for something... just a little extra special? Why didn't he do that? He didn't do it because he was a *fool*. I suspect this old myth of the genie and the three wishes traces all the way back to something like what happened to King Solomon.

King Solomon was the son of King David of Israel. He succeeded his father after a very, very long reign—a popular reign. He was a young man succeeding a very old man who had been *wildly* popular, *wildly* loved among the people of Israel—respected in spite of all of his mistakes and his faults because he was a man of God. He was a man who was energetic and who did things; and even his mistakes he did in a very, very big way.

So here comes King Solomon as a very young man, and feeling very insecure, I suspect, about what was going to happen to him as king, trying to walk in the footsteps of King David. But he was a man who loved God. He worshipped God. He went through all the ceremonies, and he did them in larger numbers—sacrificed more animals than anybody before him, I think, had ever done. Well, there came a point in time when God, who looked upon Solomon, David's son, and said, "I really love this guy. I loved David. This is David's son, how could I not love him. And he loves me." Finally, one night, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream. And he said to Solomon, "Ask what I shall give you."

“What do you want?” God actually, in this dream, gave Solomon *carte blanche*. “You want it? I’ll give it to you.” Well, Solomon was kind of overwhelmed by that. And he said:

1 Kings 3

AKJV

⁷ [...] O LORD my God, [...] I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in.

⁸ And your servant is in the middle of your people which you have chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude.

“And here I am. I don’t know how to go out of the door in the morning, and I barely know how to find my way back in at night. And I’m supposed to govern this people?” He then asked this. He said:

1 Kings 3

AKJV

⁹ Give therefore your servant an understanding heart to judge [*govern*] your people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this your so great a people?

He was in awe, frankly, of the size of the nation, of what his father had built, and all of the things that had been done there. And he was very humble about himself and very realistic about what he thought he could do and what he could not do. And so he did not ask for a lot for himself. What he really asked for was right in the...it was his heart at the moment. He *really* wanted to succeed as the king of Israel. And it says:

1 Kings 3

AKJV

¹⁰ And the speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing.

¹¹ And God said to him, Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked for yourself long life; neither have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies; but have asked for yourself understanding to discern judgment [*and to understand government*];

¹² Behold, I have done according to your words: see, I have given you a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like you before you, neither after you shall any arise like to you.

First of all, this man had his goals straight to start with; and the goal arose from a *deep* and a profound need. And, in a way (this is not unusual, I must add), his desire arose from fear. He was afraid of failure. The fact is that any worthwhile goal carries with it the risk of failure. If you can’t fail, if you can’t miss...well, what’s the value in that goal?

So, he didn’t have much choice. He *was* the king. He couldn’t decide not to be the king. And being the king, he was frightened by the level of responsibility; and his fear drove him, paradoxically, to ask for the thing that he needed the most: the ability, the wisdom, the knowledge, and the understanding to govern these people. That’s what he asked for. Now God said, “Because you have asked for this”...

1 Kings 3

AKJV

¹² Behold, I have done according to your words: see, I have given you a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like you before you, neither after you shall any arise like to you.

¹³ And I have also given you that which you have not asked, both riches, and honor: so that there shall not be any among the kings like to you all your days.

¹⁴ And if you will walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as your father David did walk, then I will lengthen your days.

“So you’re going to have wisdom and understanding. You’re also going to have wealth and honor. And if you’ll just obey me and walk according to my commandments, you’re going to have a long and a happy life.”

Now, there are some *really* profound lessons in this statement. You know, you can think a lot about the goals and the things you want in life. What do you want? “Well, I want a new house.” What do you want? “I’d like to have a Mercedes-Benz.” What do you want? “No, no. Not a Mercedes. I want one of the fancy BMWs.” “I want...” “I want...” And the list of our wants can go on and on. But the truth is that the road to happiness, the road to success, the road to winning is in the goal of *doing something worthwhile, out of which* the other things followed. He asked for the right thing. He had the right goal. He said, “I want to be able to govern these people effectively.” God said, “So be it.” And *out of that* will flow the other things in your life that you would like to have. “And if you’ll obey me—if you will keep my laws, my commandments, my statutes, my judgments—I’ll see to it that you live a *long* time.”

The core, the *really core* point about making your life work is figuring out what you want. I started to say it’s the hard part about it. But it isn’t so hard, it’s just something we don’t do. We never get around to thinking about it, and maybe taking a cup of coffee and going and sitting down somewhere, and staring off into space, and saying, “What do I really want? What do I want to do the rest of this day? What do I want to do tomorrow? Where do I want to be a year from now? Where do I want to be 20 years from now?” We just sort of go through life; we never sit down and *think* about it.

Now, for Solomon it was not so very hard to decide. He faced a frightening challenge for a young man. But he did know what he wanted. And I think he realized somehow intuitively that, from where *he* sat, there was no way to get the good life unless he went *through* this thing of being king, and of being very good at what he needed to do. And he knew he just, frankly, didn’t have it.

So his objective was to meet the challenges of being a new, young king following in the footsteps of a truly great and a much-loved king. One should never make the mistake, though, of assuming that because you know what you want today, that you will be just as clear-headed about what you want tomorrow. Solomon is a good example of that. Because here was a point in time when he was scared to death. He was afraid, and he knew what he had to have, and so he set his goal with that in mind. But, you know, when the fear passes—when you have achieved a certain level of success, the vision is there, you know what you want, and you have made some pretty good progress along to it and the fear is gone—it is awfully easy to forget what you were doing, and to forget *why* you were doing it. And Solomon, with the passage of time and the accumulation of power and wealth, got a little confused about what he wanted.

Now, fortunately for us, he wrote a book, and there is *a lot* that you and I can learn from that book about ourselves. The book is the Book of Ecclesiastes. I’ve sat down and read it a few times. I remember once was on a train going from London up to Birmingham in England. And I had a long train trip, and I rolled out the Book of Ecclesiastes, and I read it. And by the time I got very far down the line, I was depressed. It was a cloudy day and kind of gloomy outside. And I got through Ecclesiastes, and I thought, “What’s the use?” And yet, that was a pretty superficial reading on my part; because when I went back and I read it again, and I thought about what Solomon was saying here, I could see the *enormous* value in grappling with this along with the man who was the wisest of kings—a man whose wisdom was *far* surpassing that of anyone else, and a man who *cherished* wisdom, a man who put wisdom on a pedestal and said, “This is the important thing, wisdom is. Get wisdom.”

And so, it’s important, I think, to learn the lessons that this man learned; because, frankly, if you can’t learn from great teachers, then you’re going to have to go out and learn it yourself. And, aw, that learning is a *hard* process. It *hurts* to fall down, it *hurts* to skin your knees and your elbows, and it *hurts*

to go through these things. And, really, there are a lot of things like this we don't *have* to go through if we can just learn from the teacher. And so, in Ecclesiastes, Solomon says this:

Ecclesiastes 1

AKJV

- ¹ The words of the Preacher [*Teacher*], the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- ² Vanity of vanities, said the [Teacher], vanity of vanities; all is vanity.
- ³ What profit has a man of all his labor which he takes under the sun?
- ⁴ One generation passes away, and another generation comes: but the earth stays for ever.
- ⁵ The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to his place where he arose.
- ⁶ The wind goes toward the south, and turns about to the north; it whirls about continually, and the wind returns again according to his circuits.
- ⁷ All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; to the place from where the rivers come, thither they return again.
- ⁸ All things are full of labor; man cannot utter it [*You can't even describe what kind of labor it is.*]: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
- ⁹ The thing that has been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.
- ¹⁰ Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it has been already of old time, which was before us.

Solomon is basically saying, "Everything, folks, down here goes around in circles." There doesn't seem to be a destination. There is no arrival. I mean, you can work and work and slave and sweat, and you think you've arrived at your destination only to find that, no, there's something beyond that. No, there's another hill to climb. No, there's another sand dune to get across. And, no, there is no oasis in sight yet. The wind goes around in circles, and it winds up right where it was before. The rivers all run down to the sea, water is evaporated from the sea, it rains up on the mountaintops, and comes down the rivers again. It just goes round and round and round and around. Depressing, isn't it? That's how *I* felt when I read it on the train that day, and understanding that all this stuff just goes round and round. He said, in verse 11:

Ecclesiastes 1

AKJV

- ¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.

What does he mean? He says everybody is going to forget what you've done. You'll work your fool head off. You'll build an edifice. You'll accomplish all this stuff. And you're going to die and be gone, and people will say, "Who? Who was he? What did he do?"

Ecclesiastes 1

AKJV

- ¹² I the [Teacher] was king over Israel in Jerusalem. [*I was a big man.*]
- ¹³ And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: [*by the way*] this sore travail has God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith [*to keep us busy, to find out all the things that are done under heaven*].
- ¹⁴ I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Or “futility and a striving after wind.” You pursue it, you grasp for it, you reach out and you say, “Ah, there it is. I’ve got it!” And you grab the bottle, and you pull the cork out, and all that comes out is smoke.

Ecclesiastes 1

AKJV

¹⁵ That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.

Now, you know, I believe that it is in man—it is written into our genes, into our genetic code—we are inveterate problem-solvers. We see a jigsaw puzzle, we’ve got to stop and see if we can put a piece in it. We see a crossword puzzle, we’ve got to look at it and say, “Let’s see, what’s 41 Down, and what is 41 Across”, and we try to solve the puzzle. It is *in us* to solve puzzles. We are *made* to see problems and to try to find solution to them. But by the time you get to be an old man, if you’re like Solomon (and if you’re like just about anybody else) by the time you get to be an old man, you realize that, “Yes, in my lifetime I have encountered problems and I have solved them.” But in truth, when I look at the world, I look at the total supply of problems out there to be solved—I look at all the frustrations, difficulties, headaches, and what have you—I *can’t tell any difference*. I can’t tell that all my problem-solving has really reduced the number of problems out there yet to be solved.

In fact, I know in my own case that, oftentimes, it seems like the more I learn the more I see that there is *to be* learned; and so that the far horizon of learning, instead of getting *closer* seems to get further away as I learn more. That which is crooked cannot be made straight. You’ll spend your lifetime trying to make it straight. We love to try to imagine that we can suddenly find somehow the great unifying principle, that we can somehow find the great key to truth, that we can somehow find the way—that if we can just put the key in *this* lock and just turn *this* key, all of a sudden the whole world will be our oyster. It will open up before us, and everything will be wonderful and fine. I’m sorry. It doesn’t work that way. It won’t happen. There is no key. That which is crooked cannot be made straight. That which is wanting cannot be numbered. And whenever you get through all the things that you have laid out for yourself to do, you will not really be able to look ahead and say, “Well, I have reduced the number of problems that there were to be solved.”

Are you frustrated yet? Are you getting discouraged yet? Are we having fun yet, as the old saying goes? Do you understand?

Now, here’s what Solomon, I think, is trying to tell us: All you can do is to take care of the things of a day in a day. You’ve got *today* to tackle. Whatever time of day it is for you as you hear this, you’ve got the rest of the day left in which to get a few things done. Someone said this. He said, “a successful life is measured in a series of successful days.” You can have exalted goals. I hope you do. You can have lofty ideals. I really hope you do. I hope that you have them written down someplace. I hope you have them in needlepoint on the wall in a frame so you can go by them every day and say, “This is what I’m supposed to be doing with my life.” But you should salt your goals with realism every day, and you should consider *what of* your goals you can accomplish in this day.

So King Solomon struggles with this idea. He said in verse 16:

Ecclesiastes 1

AKJV

¹⁶ I communed with my own heart, [...]

That’s a poetic way of saying, “I sat down and I thought about this.”

Ecclesiastes 1

AKJV

¹⁶ [...] saying, See, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yes, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.

¹⁷ And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: [...]

“I decided, as long as I’m finding out about this thing, I ought to go down to the comedy club and see what these guys have got to say. I go to the house of laughter and watch these guys make fools of themselves. And...”

Ecclesiastes 1

ESV

¹⁷ [...] I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

I mean, you get a laugh, and a laugh is a good thing; but after it’s all over and you’ve had a couple of drinks, and laughed at the comic, and laughed at his wife, and laughed at his dad, and laughed at whoever it is that he wants you to laugh at, and you go home, you still feel kind of empty. And he then says this:

Ecclesiastes 1

AKJV

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Now, it’s *hard* to argue with that; because as you know more about the world, you know more about the hurt, you know more about the frustrations, and the result of it is a feeling of sorrow that can settle on you like a blanket. And in much wisdom is much grief because, you know, it is to the wise man that we carry our griefs and we carry our problems. And people, because of his wisdom, kept bringing stuff to Solomon all the time. And so *all he heard* was grief. You know, it’s a funny thing: In an organization, the higher it is you get up the pyramid, the more all the easy problems are all solved by somebody else. It’s nothing but the tough problems; it’s nothing but the heartbreaking, *grievous* problems that ever make it to you when you get up there. Are you sure you want to be there? Maybe you’d like to have a little more simple operation. Well, Solomon went back to the comedy club. He said,

Ecclesiastes 2

AKJV

¹ I said in my heart, Go to now, I will prove you with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity [*emptiness*].

² I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What does it [accomplish]?

³ I sought in my heart to give myself to wine, [...]

He said, “I know what I’ll do. These jokes aren’t very funny. I’ll have something to drink and see if I can get a little bit more out of it that way.” Or maybe, as some today would do, they would try drugs. “Because I haven’t made it this way, maybe drugs will open up my mind; and maybe it will expand me so I can do some great thing.” He said:

Ecclesiastes 2

AKJV

³ I sought in my heart to give myself to wine, yet acquainting my heart with wisdom; [...]

“I wanted to keep my wisdom with me all the way through this.”

Ecclesiastes 2

AKJV

³ [...] and to lay hold on folly, [...]

“I really tried to grasp the stupidity of men, and understand why it was that way. Why do people do such stupid and hurtful things? I did this so that”...

Ecclesiastes 2

AKJV

³ [...] I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.

Well, there wasn't much in that either.

Ecclesiastes 2

AKJV

⁴ I made me great works; [...]

“Since I couldn't make the rest of that work, I'll make great works.”

Ecclesiastes 2

KJ2000

⁴ [...] I built houses; I planted vineyards:

⁵ I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them with all kind of fruit:

“I became a great *landscape* architect. I got the stuff everywhere.”

Ecclesiastes 2

KJ2000

⁶ I made myself pools of water, [*so that I'd have plenty*] with which to water the forest that brings forth trees:

“I want it all. And I didn't want to have to do too much work myself, so...”, he says:

Ecclesiastes 2

AKJV

⁷ I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me:

“So I've got herds, I got Herefords, and Jerseys, and different kinds of cattle all over the place out here. Nobody had it like me.”

Ecclesiastes 2

KJ2000

⁸ I gathered for myself also silver and gold, [...]

“I had all kinds of silver on my table. I had gold ware on my table. I ate off of gold plates. I had...”

Ecclesiastes 2

AKJV

⁸ [...] the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: [...]

“I had all the unique little works of art that a person could ever desire. I had all of it. And I had entertainers.”

Ecclesiastes 2

KJ2000

⁸ [...] I got men singers and women singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all sorts.

⁹ So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: [*but all through this*] also my wisdom remained with me.

“And I went further:”

Ecclesiastes 2

KJ2000

¹⁰ And whatsoever my eyes desired I kept not from them, [...]

“I wanted it, I had it.”

Ecclesiastes 2

KJ2000

¹⁰ [...] I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labor: and this was my reward of all my labor.

“In fact, I did enjoy my labor. In fact, that’s what I got out of it.”

Ecclesiastes 2

ESV

¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity [*emptiness*] and a striving after [*a handful of*] wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Hmm. Solomon can be a little discouraging, you know, but his point has to be considered. You have got to think about what it is this man has said; because here is something *very important* to know: It is *easy* to forget your goals and objectives. It is *easy* to forget why you are doing what you are doing. *Write them down*. Put them on the wall where they will catch your eye. Get someone to do it for you in needlepoint. Get your computer to print it out on something. Take it down to a print shop. Have it put up on a piece of paper. Have it burned into wood that your goal in life is *this*, and hang it up on the wall where you actually see it every time you walk by it.

Oh, I know, after a while you won’t even notice that it’s there anymore; but it’s still your goal. If it ever changes—if you ever wake up someday and realize, “That’s not my goal anymore”—take it down, figure out what your goal is, write it down again, and put it back up; because when you lose sight of where you are going and what you are doing it for, you wind up going down through this long, frustrating road that Solomon went. “Well, I’ll try this to see if it will make me happy.” “Well that

didn't work. I'll go try entertainment." "Entertainment didn't work. I'll go try the arts." "Arts didn't work. Maybe I'll try wine, women, and song." Solomon said, "I've already been there. It doesn't work either." The truth is, if you don't write your goals down—someplace—they will be as elusive as smoke; they will be here today, gone tomorrow; and you will do like everyone else you know, just about, does. You'll do what feels good today. You'll take care of the *urgent* today. You will not take care of the *important* things. You'll take care of the *noisy* things, the *pushy* things, the things that intrude into your life; and the truly important things will never get done at all. And so, Solomon says:

Ecclesiastes 2

KJ2000

¹¹ Then I looked on all the works that my hands had made, and on the labor that I had expended on it: and, behold, all was vanity and like grasping the wind, and there was no profit under the sun.

¹² And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can a man do that comes after the king? even that which has been already done.

¹³ Then I saw that wisdom excels folly, as far as light excels darkness.

Ah, yes. So whatever else there is that's going on—all of the foolishness, all the mirth, all the laughter, all the chasing after women (or whatever it is that you think you're going to do that's going to make you happy)—*this* man, who did it all and says, "You can't do anything beyond what I've done", said, "There's nothing out there, fellow. *Wisdom* is the thing. Get wisdom."

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